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Reviving Sydney Lake as the Historical Park of Kuala Lumpur

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Abstract

In 1888, a first recreational area was created in Kuala Lumpur as a place for the British residents. Now, after more than 120 years this lake area still exists. Reintroducing the Sydney Lake Garden as the historical park is not about enhancing the colonial heritage but more on the history that this area once had. With the used of Greater Kuala Lumpur/Klang Valley (GKL/KV) as one of the main references, this paper will try to relate it on reviving this recreational area as one of new tourist attraction of Kuala Lumpur, the Sydney Lake Historical Park.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the history of Sydney Lake and the ideas of enlivening it as the Historical Park of Kuala Lumpur. Thus, the discussion started with the history of the establishment of Sydney Lake in the

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1880s and its functions during the early years of its creation. The second part of the paper will study the conditions of Sydney Park in the era of modernity, the 2000s and the changes done ever since its existence. The last part of the paper will touch on the efforts taken by other conservation bodies especially in United States (National Park Service) and Great Britain (English Heritage). Sources from other international organizations such as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) will also take into account in achieving the purpose of this research. Furthermore, discussions continue with the actions taken by the Malaysian Government and the local authority in conserving the originality of Sydney Lake Garden. It will relate to the implementation of the Greater Kuala Lumpur/Klang Valley (GKL/KL) and others relevant laws implemented in Malaysia and its impact on this historic park.

2. Sydney Lake: The beginning

The idea of the establishment of a recreational area in Kuala Lumpur started when Frank Athelstane Swettenham appointed as the Selangor Residents in 1882. During his early administration, he realized “the new capital city [Kuala Lumpur] was in urgent need of a facelift” (Sardar, 2000, p. 67). Swettenham’s vision started with the refurbishment of the old town area. Sharing the same views was Alfred Reid Venning, the Selangor State Treasurer. If Swettenham was concentrating more on the city redevelopment, A. R. Venning is more interested in creating a new recreational area for the Kuala Lumpur residents (Aziz, 2007). During the era, ‘Padang’ (now known as Dataran Kuala Lumpur or Merdeka Square) was the only “main center of European communal activity” (Gullick, 1998, p. 50). Thus, a new recreational area is urgently needed at that time.

With the support gathered from Swettenham, A. R. Venning took the first step in searching a suitable area that could cater the needs of the Kuala Lumpur’s residents especially the British and European communities. An appropriate site identified at the edge of the city, near the 15th mile of the old Damansara Road. This area consists of “a clear stream (Sungei Bras Bras) crossed the road after meandering through a valley that consisted of several acres of swamp” (Selangor Journal, II. p. 9, 22 September 1893, written by A. R. Venning) in (Gullick, 2007, p. 9). Filled with “briars and lalang, forest trees, screw pines and tree ferns” this area were “interspersed in picturesque confusion” (Gullick, 2007, p. 9). In 1888, the creation of a new lake garden began (Fig. 1).

A year later, in 1889, the area which previously overgrown with wild bushes has changed to the “finest amenity” for the use of the people of Kuala Lumpur (Gullick, 1998, p. 24). On May 13, 1889, this Lake was formally open to the Kuala Lumpur’s colonial elite by the Governor of the Straits Settlements, Sir Cecil Clementi Smith (Fatt, 2011, p. 165; The Kuala Lumpur Municipal Council, 1959, p. 17). Named after Mrs. Swettenham, Sydney, this area quickly became famous among the residents. This unique space that covered with greenery and flowering plants species is also enlivened with music played by the Police Band (Fatt, 2011, p. 165). The characteristic adds to the uniqueness of Sydney Lake to the residents of Kuala Lumpur.



Fig. 1. Map of Sydney Lake (highlighted in blue) and the old town of Kuala Lumpur in 1920 (Adapted from Gullick, 2000, p. 231)

Started with a massive area of approximately 60 hectares, it has been expanded to almost 70 hectares in ten years' time (Aziz, 2007). With the populations of 140,000 people in 1930s, the extension of the garden is continued. During the process "Europeans and some adventurous locals had explored the ravines to the north and west of the Lake Gardens" to find the most suitable area without losing the original functions and characters of the area (Fatt, 2011, p. 165). Therefore, even after 48 years of its creation, Sydney Lake remaining its identity and become a natural habitat for flora and fauna. As reported by a British Residents at that time, Stanley Wilson Jones, in 1937:



"Quite a number of common lowland birds may be seen in the Lake Gardens. Black Panther, Golden Cats (Rimau Daun), Honey Bears and a small pack of wild dogs have been seen in these ravines following in the trail of their food supply which consists of monkeys, mouse deer, and small ground animals" (Fatt, 2011, p. 165)

2.1. *It's early functions*

During its early years, Sydney Lake has become the favorite place for the elite to go for relaxing and strolling while enjoying the natural lush green area. Besides, "some even rode horses in the ravines" (Fatt, 2011, p. 165). Since its establishment, this recreational area has developed multi-purpose functions to the residents. With its impressive image, it has become an important place for the events that took place during the era. One of the earliest recorded events was the Second Federated Malay Straits (FMS) Durbar meeting that involved sultans of FMS and the State Council. Because of its unique characteristic, Sydney Lake always becomes the central meeting point for almost all important events held in Malaya.

One of the reports published by the National Achieves of Malaysia mentioned that Lake Garden could cater up to 20,000 visitors at a time (National Achieves of Malaysia, 1966). Series of the important events or functions held in Lake Garden summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Adapted from National Archive Malaysia, 2015

Year	Events / Functions
1903	Second Federated Malay Straits Durbar meeting 
1956	First Water Pageant organized by M. C. FF. S in conjunction with 'Pesta Tunku'. Lake Garden Festival
1957 (August)	Merdeka Celebration
1957 (September)	Water Pageant
1958	First Anniversary of Merdeka Water Carnival Fireworks Displays
1960	Memorial Service by the first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj. 
1965	Senirama Malaysia Festival
1966	Yang di-Pertuan Agong's Birthday
1975	Lake Gardens the Reopening Ceremony by the second Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak

The Lake Gardens Reopening Ceremony in 1975 by the second Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak once again enhanced the functions of Sydney Lake. During the ceremony, which held in conjunction with the Federal Territory Day, Sydney Lake is officially known as Perdana Lake (Tasik Perdana). One of the aims in this ceremony is to add a more recreational area in Kuala Lumpur and able to attract more local and international tourist. In a way, it also helps to promote the outstanding value offered by this park (National Achieves of Malaysia, 1975)

Besides being an important place of all important events, the establishment of the Sydney Lake also acts as a center for the new development in the nearby area. When Sydney Lake officially opened, roads were built, and so the buildings. In 1889, Residency Building (now known as Carcosa Seri Negara) was one of the earliest buildings constructed in the area. The building is purposely designed by overlooking the picturesque view of the Sydney Lake Garden (Gullick, 1998, p. 24). A year later, a new clubhouse, the Lake Club is built within the "luscious and green Lake Gardens" ("Royal Lake Club Kuala Lumpur," 2014). In 1928, one the famous Chinese Mansion owned by Chan Wing (now known as the former residence of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong) also built close to Sydney Lake (Fig. 2). Also, infrastructures are also developed to cater the visitor's needs such as the canteen and the boat house.

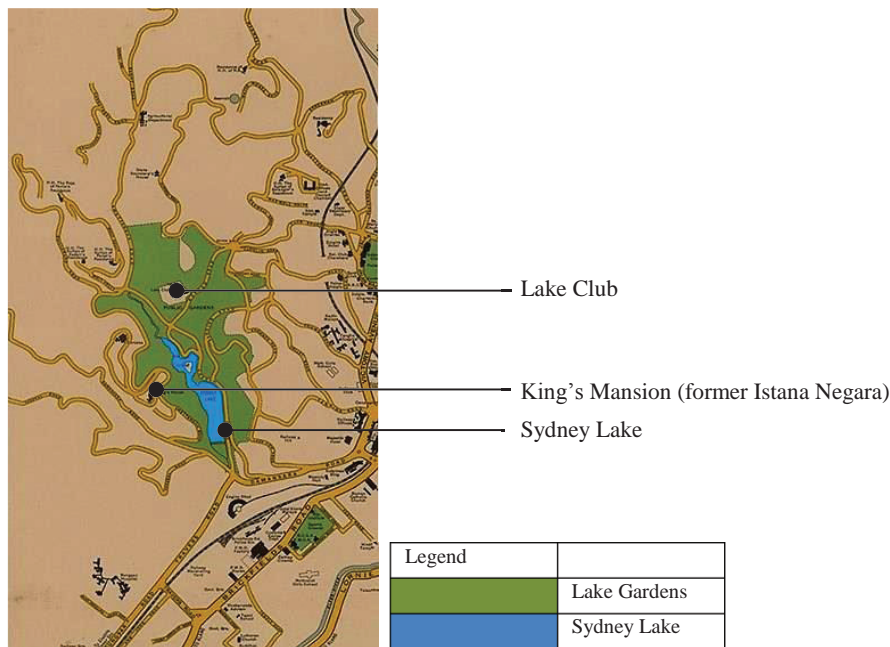


Fig 2. Map of Sydney Lake in 1950 with the adjacent area and buildings (Adapted from National Achieves of Malaysia, 1950)

3. Sydney Lake: Nowadays

After more than 120 years, Sydney Lake is no longer an exclusive park to the British colonial's elite. Since 1947, it has opened to the public to enjoy the greenery in the center of the congested city of Kuala Lumpur. Surrounded by high-rise building, this area manages to remain its greenery and survive with an area more than 100 hectares (Fig. 3). Under the management of Kuala Lumpur City Hall (KLCH), it has evolved to cater the needs of the Kuala Lumpur's residents.



Fig. 3. Sydney Lake Garden remains its identity even surrounded by new development (Author, 2015)

In 2010, Sydney Lake Garden witnessed “the most extensive redevelopment project” (Kuala Lumpur City Hall, 2011b). Thousands of new plants species planted in this historic garden. In 2011, this lake had once again rebranding and known as the Perdana Botanical Garden. Comprised of more than 20 gardens, including the completed and the ongoing projects, this area is not only known because of its man-made lake, but also thousands of collections of plants. In fact, today's functions and characters of Sydney Lake is still inlined with what has been proposed by A. R. Venning 120 years back (Fatt, 2011, p. 165).

From the written resources, there are few elements in this area that could consider as treasured heritage items. The Sydney Lake itself is one of the most valuable heritage items from the site. In fact, the creation of this area started with the lake. It has become the heart of the Lake Gardens and the center of enjoyment for the visitors (Gullick, 2000, p. 114). With its water fountains and bridges, it portrays the influence of nature and art in its design (Gullick, 2000, p. 113) (Fig. 4). Besides the Lake, the Boat House also has its unique historical value. It has become the major meeting point during the reopening ceremony of Sydney Lake in 1975 (Fig. 5). Although the existing building has rebuilt, it remains its site originality.



Fig 4. (a) One of the famous icon of Sydney Lake – the bridge (1910) (National Achieves of Malaysia, 1975); (b) The same picturesque view of the bridge in 2015 (Author, 2015)



Fig 5. (a) The reopening ceremony of Sydney Lake (1975) (National Achieves of Malaysia, 1975); (b) The same area (Boat House) still exist until today (Author, 2015)

However, observation showed that there is no special plaque on site to commemorate the significant of Sydney Lake. An information board is provided but only exhibit the overall master plan of the Lake Gardens. There is only one plaque with the current Prime Minister's of Malaysia signature during the launched of Perdana Botanical Garden (Fig. 6). The historical background of Sydney Lake could only access from the Kuala Lumpur Botanical Garden website. Therefore, the process of learning and understanding the history of the site is quite limited. The historic site plaque is important as it helps the public to appreciate this historic area and relate it to the actual site conditions. Hence, it will encourage the public, especially the younger generations to learn and value the history of the place. It is afraid that, these missing pieces of history could embedded sense of place of this area among the visitors. Generally, new developments in the city centre usually will “transform constructed places and place meanings” and affected the originality of heritage area (Ujang, 2010, p. 62).



Fig. 6. Plaque with Prime Minister's of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak's signature in *Laman Perdana* (Author, 2015)

4. Sydney Lake as the Historical Park of Kuala Lumpur

Unlike heritage monument, heritage park is valued differently. Referring to English Heritage (2014), parks or gardens with more than 30 years old deserves to Gazette as "historic" (English Heritage, 2014). However, looking at the age itself is not enough. There are other criteria needed to identify before any parks or gardens could list as historic areas. In United States (US) for example, the recognition of National Historical Park (NHP) is placed under the management of National Park Service (NPS). Until March 2015, from more than 400 areas, more than 90 sites are listed under the Historic Park or Site categories (National Park Service, 2015). One of the well known NHP is the Mississippi's National River and Recreation Area (MNRRA), Minnesota. This river listed as NHP because of its "unique concentration of nationally significant resources" especially on historical and cultural aspects (National Park Service, 2015).

In Britain, the conservation effort for the heritage park is managed by English Heritage organization. Since 1983, the English Heritage "Register of Historic Parks and Gardens of special historic in England" has identifies more than 1,600 heritage sites (English Heritage, 2015b). For the management purposes, listed Historic Parks and Gardens categorized into three grades. The three grading criteria are:

- Grade I – sites are of exceptional interest;
- Grade II* – sites are of particular importance, of more than special interest; and
- Grade II – sites are of special interest, warranting every effort to preserve them (English Heritage, 2015).

Based on this merit or band system, sites with most significant historical interest are eligible to register under the National Heritage List for England. The implementation of the value system is very useful in assisting parties involved especially the local planning authorities in the conservation works.

Apart from efforts taken by the selected countries, there are also few examples of historic parks conservation involving the international bodies. Among them is the UNESCO's World Heritage Site. Although there are no particular categories for the historic park, there are few examples of famous parks and gardens listed under UNESCO. Most of these historical parks are nominated together with the heritage building. These parks act as the boundaries and give protection to the listed heritage site. Some of the listed gardens are the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, London and Royal Exhibition Building and Carlton Gardens in Melbourne, Australia.

As for ICOMOS, preservation of historic gardens is mentioned in details in the Florence Charter 1982. Under this Charter, a historic garden is defined as "an architectural and horticultural composition of interest to the public from the historical or artistic point of view" (ICOMOS, 1982, p. 1). Since the introduction of this Charter, it has become an essential tools and reference in the maintenance and conservation of a historic garden. Back to the historical park

issue in Malaysia, the year 2011 has become the new benchmark of the conservation activities in Malaysia. Besides the process of upgrading Sydney Lake as a Botanical Garden, this area is also highlighted under the Entry Point Project (EPP) 7: Creating Iconic Places and Attractions. Under this EPP, a new initiative known as the “Green Icon of Kuala Lumpur” is introduced (Performance Management & Delivery Unit, 2011). This “Green Icons” stated in the document is referring to the development of the Tun Abdul Razak Heritage Park. Recognition was given to Sydney Lake as one of the gardens that included in the initiatives. Besides Sydney Lake, six other adjacent gardens; the Orchid Garden, Deer Park, Bird Park, Butterfly Park, ASEAN Sculpture Garden and National Monument are also included. In addition, nine significant buildings are also incorporated into the Tun Abdul Razak Heritage Park (Fig. 7). This action has lead to a new phase of gardens or parks conservation in Malaysia.

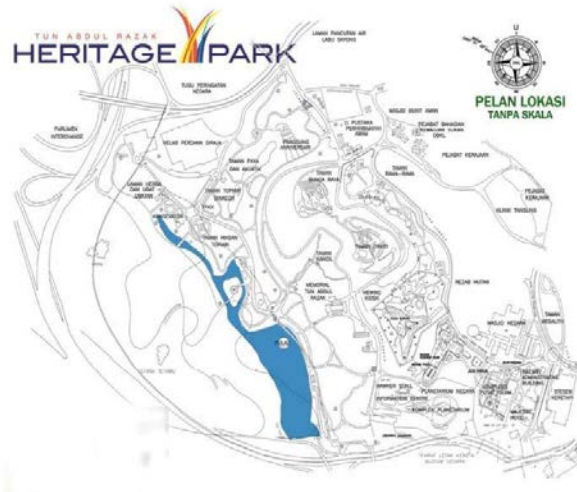


Fig. 7. Tun Abdul Razak Heritage Park. Highlighted in blue is Sydney Lake area (Adapted from Kuala Lumpur City Hall, 2011)

Interestingly, this area is also stated in the Prime Minister’s speech during the presentation of the Tenth Malaysia Plan 2011 – 2015. Mentioned under the *Strategic Trust 5.1: Ensuring a Higher Quality of Life in Urban Areas*:

“The Government aims to provide an attractive and comfortable living environment for city dwellers to live, work and play. Open spaces and green areas will be created and improved. Among the initiatives to implemented are the transformation of the Lake Gardens in Kuala Lumpur into a botanical garden and the setting up of a Malaysia Truly Asia Tourism Centre in Kuala Lumpur.” (Economic Planning Unit, 2010, p. 43).

The details of this positive initiatives included in this Plan in *Chapter 6: Building an Environment that Enhances Quality of Life: Open Spaces and Green Corridors*. The Plan and the EPP will support the strategic plan included in Greater Kuala Lumpur/Klang Valley (GKL/KV) document. The establishment of Tun Abdul Razak Heritage Park under the GKL/KV is a good start for Sydney Lake on recognizing it as a historical park. The efforts are taken by Kuala Lumpur City Hall also represented in its Structure Plan 2020. Under the *Strategic Zone for City Centre: 17.2.3 (b): Green network and open spaces*. The only attempt is to enhance this area as the “premier park of the City” (Kuala Lumpur City Hall, 2005). These actions portrait the Venning’s vision in mid-1890 in transforming Lake Gardens as the “prime site” of Kuala Lumpur (Gullick, 2000, p. 166).

The efforts taken by the government and local authorities is finally paid off when Lake Garden listed as one of the National Heritage. Designated in 2012 as a natural site, the future of this site will be well preserved. Under the *National Heritage Act 2005 (Act 645)*, “natural heritage” is protected under Section 67: *Declaration of National Heritage* (Lembaga Penyelidikan Undang-undang, 2006, p. 133). Thus, any actions or decisions regarding this area need to consult for a particular permission from the Federal Government.

With these efforts given by the government and the local authorities involved, it is possible that one day Sydney Lake will be known as the Historical Park of Kuala Lumpur. However, more actions needed primarily to publicize the history and origin of this area and its historical elements to the public. As mentioned earlier, there are few spots

need to be enhanced and complemented by information relating to the history of the place. These steps need to be in line with rules and regulations stated and at the same time maintaining the originality of the site. At age 127 years old, Sydney Lake should be the pioneer project as the first historical park in Malaysia. It is not only witnessed in significant events happened in this area but most importantly, it is a place where the “positive cultural identity” is expressed from the various ethnic background of Malaysian (Bakar, 2002, p. 125).

5. Conclusion

As a conclusion, by gazeteting this recreational park as one of the National Heritage, the area will be well protected from the future development. Hopefully, it would not face the same fate as what happen to Merdeka Parks in Kuala Lumpur and Melaka. For the sake of developments, both park already erased from the map and only remain in the historical text. Sydney Lake could become the ‘living’ reference to the future generations. There are lots of historical elements that still need to be explored. The future research might include the landscape elements found in this area and how far its contributes to the history of Sydney Lake. In line with the sensitivity and awareness on the heritage conservation especially in an urban area (Peerapun, 2012, p.36), positively the urban heritage park will get the benefits from it. As quoted by one of the famous Roman scholar, Marcus Tullius Cicero, “history is the tutor of life”. Without knowing the history, it is afraid that it will create more damages to the future planning of the site instead of conserving it as part of the Kuala Lumpur’s identity. Today, the vision that was once had by Venning in 1890 to transformed Sydney Lake to a “place of healthful and relaxation for the public” has become reality (J.M Gullick, 2000). Moreover, his ideas to ensure Sydney Lake Garden to become one of the well-known botanical garden and better than Penang or Singapore Botanical Gardens now achieved (Aziz, 2007).

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